

## Gerri Craig: A recovery of balance

*I like to look at my life as sort of an interesting series of connect-the-dots. I followed enough dots to get me to recovery.*

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

In 1978, Gerri Craig's activism brought her to her own backyard. After years of confronting and working to change the oppressions of racism, sexism and homophobia, Craig fought and freed herself from an addiction to alcohol and drugs.

Since then, she's used that experience to support others in recovery from drug and alcohol addictions. A founder of the Live and Let Live Club, she also works with 12-Step Haven, a resource center for women and children in recovery. Craig helped launch a residential treat-

### Profile

ment program for Native American women and children; she served as executive director of the Portland Feminist Women's Health Center from 1984 to 1986, most recently, she worked for Right Step Recovery, a chemical dependency treatment program for gay men and lesbians.

When Craig discusses the politics of addiction, anecdotes anchor the theory close to home. Her no-nonsense speech is spiked with phrases like "far out" and "lucky ducky," a peppery laugh and a quick grin. A midwest twang curls through now and then, showing her Chicago upbringing. And her hands won't sit still. They shape the air as she talks; they reach and wave; they periodically lift a coffee cup. They do not, however, hold a cigarette. Craig recently quit smoking after a 25-year habit.

"In 1978, actually just about nine years ago next week, when I got clean and sober, I kind of came to grips with my own chemical dependency and looked around. I was looking for some support for that, and at that time there was very little in the way of community support, certainly in the lesbian community, or the feminist community, or any kind of community that I had been associated with.

There are a lot of reasons why there's a high incidence [of chemical dependency] in the gay and lesbian community. One is that it's historically been true that where lesbians and gay men have hung out is in bars. That has been our sanctuary, our only place. And so even a lot of our political activities and stuff have centered around alcohol, certainly. And, sure, I think that it is a reflection of what goes on in the dominant culture at large. But it wasn't being addressed very well.

"So a handful of us got together. We had been trying to have some gay 12-step meetings at other recovery organizations in Portland. We had a Sunday night meeting at the Alano Club in northwest Portland, and we were asked to leave there to make room for a group of doctors who wanted to have their meeting there. Actually, it turned out to be our chance to make lemonade out of lemons because a group of men and women who were recovering got together and formed a non-profit organization that was the Live and Let Live Club.

"What it felt like we were doing was saving our asses, rather than getting into great socio-political debate about the incidence of chemical dependency in our community. Initially, that's what it felt like. We wanted to create something for ourselves, and also for other people.

"I sort of liken it to when I was in my early 20s and going to San Francisco and first getting involved in heavy-duty leftist politics and discovering the evils of class . . . and all of a sudden it was right on to be working class. Now for the first time it feels right on to be clean and sober. And it didn't feel that way in 1978. It felt like . . . people



really didn't understand. That it was threatening to people around me. It was like, 'God, if Gerri's saying she's an addict and an alcoholic' — and I certainly wasn't doing that because I wanted to — 'what does that mean about me?'

"One of the motivations for me wanting to get clean and sober was that I felt I was really sort of a . . . paper tiger, with all my running-around struggles to deal with sexism and racism and homophobia and all those things. But I had alcoholism, and that was what was going to get me first."

*Craig's work history seems to be an obstacle-course of charged issues: racism, women's reproductive rights, alcoholism, the mental-health system. She says it wasn't a path planned in advance: she simply traced her passions to their logical end and looked back to see a pattern only afterwards.*

"When I first came to Portland I worked in a collective day-care center . . . [later] I worked at the Women's Mental Health Project. Interestingly enough, through that project, and while I was first struggling, trying to get clean and sober and not maintaining sobriety, we decided to do a lesbian sobriety workshop. We didn't think anybody would come. . . . About 30 people came. It was the first time that I'm aware of that [alcoholism] was ever addressed in the lesbian community here.

"I feel very fortunate to not have had to do my recovery alone. I mean, I couldn't. That was the thing. The hardest thing was admitting that I had a problem and then asking for help. I was raised to be self-sufficient, thank you, and certainly in my spectrum of things, in my political analysis, which was: there are no individual solutions and, you know, 'buck up, buckaroo,' that kind of thing, that was probably the hardest thing.

"The first year from any kind of destructive dependency is — was, for me — the hardest because so many changes happened. So many changes — where I went, what I did, who I hung out with. It was the most dramatic, certainly, in terms of physical recovery, and emotionally and spiritually. I mean, the world looked different. And felt different, because I wasn't using a chemical to deal with any of that. Lots and lots of things changed.

"I like to look at my life as sort of an interesting series of connect-the-dots. I followed enough dots to get me to recover. I mean, I learned a lot. I learned some valuable lessons through experience that I'm now able to share

with other people in some kind of empathetic understanding that I wouldn't have had if I didn't have those experiences.

"In the recovery programs that I've worked on I've been able to alleviate a little guilt, and some remorse, that I had about my life . . . I think I now know more than ever that there's a lot of hope. I have a lot of hope. And because of those experiences I have a really eclectic support system in my life. . . . Not long ago my lover and I did a commitment ceremony. We had about a hundred people and I was amazed at this body of people who emerged, this body of people who were . . . a rainbow of colors, and men and women, and straight and gay, and old and kids. I felt incredibly grateful for my life then, incredibly privileged and lucky.

"I'm one who believes in working for social change. I've always believed in that. I think that it's necessary. I also think it's important that we have a network of people to support us in our struggles, that we don't try to do this stuff alone, that we get nurtured and loved and cared about along the way so that we're able to do this, you know, for the long haul. That's how I feel — that I'm in this for the long haul and, having been given a second chance to do it a different way, to be clean and sober, it's been really necessary for me to take care of myself emotionally and spiritually . . . And I feel like I have that in my life, and that's a wonderful thing. If there's something that I don't have, it's the kind of alienation and loneliness that a lot of people have. . . . I'm a lucky ducky. Really.

"There has to be a balance. One of my teachers in my life once told me . . . when I was at the [Portland Feminist Women's Health Center] and I had agreed to take that position of executive director for two years, and at the end of that time I felt like I needed to leave, that someone else needed to do that. And I struggled with that a long time . . . And this teacher of mine told me, she said, 'Gerri, geese fly in formation. But what they do, by nature, is rotate the position of lead goose.' So, you know, even a goose has the sense to get out of the wind once in a while.

"You just can't run on empty all the time. And there's different ways to fill ourselves up. When I look at the reasons that drugs and alcohol seemed to work for years in my life, it was because they filled up some of those empty places. And when that stopped working, I had to find something else.

"I'm also involved with another organization called 12-Step Haven, which is a resource center for women and children in recovery, and my lover and I have had the opportunity to do foster care and respite care for children who come from chemically dependent families. It's been an amazing experience to realize that, probably, in truth, my life is about half over, and to look at these little ones and see what kind of influence, what kind of value I can have in children's lives, to give them a vision of hope and how it can be different.

"I was very sad to see Right Step [which closed in August] leave the community. I think having that treatment center in our community could have done us all a lot of good in being part of the solution to the problem.

"I would love to see a drug- and alcohol-free space in the community. It's not unusual now to go in gay bars and see non-alcoholic drinks on the menu. That always does my little heart good. But it would be nice to have a place that didn't have alcohol at all. Especially when you look at things like AIDS and the connection that a compromised immune system — certainly drugs and alcohol compromise your immune system — has on the disease, or on the ability to make decisions about safe sex . . . it's like playing Russian Roulette.

*A friend has described Craig as being "willing to say things that are enormously unpopular." Craig laughs, trying the phrase on for size. She grins and nods — "yeah, sure . . . I guess so" — as if both pleased and surprised at how well it fits.*

"I have a lot of passion behind the things that I believe in . . . it just seems like the right thing

to do. Last night I was in Powell's Bookstore, you know, real yuppie bookstore, la di da, Friday night, eleven o'clock, and some long-haired boy had taken offense at a street person, a homeless person, an older man, who came in there. The guy was yelling at him for smoking a cigarette . . . and the next thing I know, this guy had just picked him up and was bodily throwing him out the door and then went out there and was kicking the shit out of him.

"And I didn't think about it, I just went out there and started screaming at this long-haired guy, 'You can't do this. I mean, it's not OK to do this.' So, yeah, I didn't think about what this guy was going to think. And I don't know why. It's just . . . I knew it was right, you know. And I don't think that necessarily makes me special or anything.

"I think it's important sometimes to go out on the edge. I think that some of the privilege, some of the freedom that I have in my life today came about as a result of other people who have gone out on the edge and I feel a debt and a gratitude to continue to do that . . . There have been plenty of freedom-fighters, lesbian activists, political activists, people who have believed in freedom and equality for the greatest numbers . . . When I was working at the health center, people used to say, 'My God, you got a bomb; how can you continue to go to work there?' Because it's right. Because it is the right thing to do. Because other people have done it."

*Craig isn't sure where her convictions will land her next.*

"I imagine myself in some similar sort of . . . something within human services. I can't imagine myself doing anything other than that. It's pretty much all I've ever done. I may stay in alcoholism treatment and drug addiction treatment, or some other aspect of social service. Domestic violence . . . I have an interest in that, in women's health. I'm not sure. We'll see what happens, as the little dots connect some more."



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